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ABSTRACT

Investigated were the areas of role modeling and career salience for older female college students, with career salience defined as actively seeking to use education by pursuing a career. A pilot questionnaire was administered to all female students 35 and over in the Department of Psychology (N=40), with a focus upon background factors, career salience measures, and role model variables. Results indicated that undergraduates were as career salient as graduate students, that professional women and working women in their own family served as strong positive role models, and that role models did not serve in a technical sense but rather as mentors who pushed them to realize their full potential. (Author/KA)

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ROLE MODELS AND CAREER SALIENCE IN OLDER FEMALE COLLEGE STUDENTS IN PSYCHOLOGY

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Paper Presented at Western Psychological Association Meetings
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Role Models and Career Salience in Older Female College Students in Psychology

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A word of explantion before I begin. What I'm going to share with you today is really a case study, not of an individual, but of a very special group--older female college students in psychology. My data will be presented as a clinical profile. My tables contain raw data. No attempt was made to perform statistical tests; when you see the results, I think you'll understand why. Why did I undertake these interviews? As a pilot project to develope a role modeling questionnaire which is the next step in my research. But at this early stage, I was more interested in the women's personal observations of the variables I'm looking at.

With the growing number of female students returning to school after raising a family or finding themselves stuck in low-paying jobs, the special problems of this group are coming to light. One problem area frequently cited as a negative influence on all female students is lack of occupational role models, particularly female role models. Role models are usually defined as persons who demonstrate how something is done in a technical sense and for whom others may develope the wish to imitate and do what the model has demonstrated. The bulk of the reasearch on role models for women has been done with undergraduates entering college straight out of high school. Thus, we need to know to what extent college is providing effective role models for older as well a younger women.

Another problem specific to the older returning student is the notion that these women are only returning to school to take a few classes to improve themselves and are not seriously interested in pursuing a career or "doing something" with their education. Actively seeking to use education by pursuing a career was my definition of career salience. Non-career salience,then, was going to school primarily for purposes other than a career. Would we find older undergraduates less career salient than

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a comparison group of demonstrated salience, that is, graduate students working for Ph.D.'s?

To probe more deeply into these areas of role modeling and career salience in older female undergraduates a pilot questionaire was administered through personal interview to all female students 35 and over in the Department of Psychology. Twenty undergraduates and 20 Ph.D. candidates were found. The undergraduates were all drawn from psychology; the Ph.D students were from psychology and educational psychology. All were registered Winter 1978 at the University of Washington and virtually every available subject over 35 was used. Thus, in effect, we have the entire population of such special students. The questionnaire was divided into three types of questions: background factors, career salience measures , and role model variables.

The background factors included marital status, SES, number of children, etc. The career salience measures included Eyde's Reasons for working Scale from which two scores were derived, and Eyde's Desire to Work Scale. Other career salience measures were certainty of occupational choice, greatest life satisfaction, aspirations, etc. Occupational role modeling was approached through questions of influencers of career decisions, professional level of family members, work experience, as well as the open ended questions of: "Who have been your career role models?, "In what ways did they affect your career choice?", "How did they influence you?", and "In what way did the most important influence on your career choice affect you?"

First, how did the undergraduates and graduate students compare in terms of background factors? These women came from very similar backgrounds as can be seen from Table 1 of the handout. About half of each group was married and the bulk of the remainder divorced. They ranged in age from 34-67 years. The graduate students tended to be younger with a median age of 36 while the median age of the undergraduates was 44. This will be interesting later when level of educational and career aspirations are contrasted with remaining years in the work force.

Table 1 also shows that the graduate women had fewer children than the undergraduates ($mean_{GR}$=1.4; $mean_{UG}$=2.6). This is due mainly to the large proportion of

graduate women who had no children. The graduate women also tended to have less children at home. Age and number of children could be a factor in why these undergraduate women tended to be older than the graduate students. More children means delaying the time when women feel they can return to school.

The present family income of both groups had 55% earning under $19,000 and 45% earning $20,000 or more. The graduate students interestingly clumped together either at the low end of the scale (less than $10,000) or at $30,000 or more.

The highest income level of parents shows another difference between the groups. Over half of the undergraduates had parents who earned $10,000-$19,000, while only 25% of the graduates students' parents fell into this range. On the other hand, 45% of the graduate women's parents earned $30,000 or more while only 15% of the undergraduate women fell into this income level.

The most impressive differences between the groups, then, were that undergraduates were older, had more children, had more children at home, and had parents of a lower socioeconomic status than graduate students.

Now for the important question of career salience. Just how occupationally motivated were these older female undergraduates in psychology? By definition, the graduate students were highly career salient. By virtue of the commitment of time and energy it takes to get into and stay in graduate school, they have demonstrated their dedication to a career. The undergraduate women were thus expected not to be as career salient as the graduate women. What did we find? Contrary to expectations, there was a striking similarity in career salience between the two groups (see Table 2).

Responses to the Greatest Life Satisfaction item were "career salient" if career was marked first or second. Here there was a very similar response from the two groups with over half of both choosing family relationships first. Only six graduate and six undergraduate women picked career first, and the majority of those who chose career second put family relationships first. The surprising fact here is that the graduate students were not more career salient using this definition.

Educational goal was also a career salience measure, higher career salience represented by wanting an advanced degree. Here again the graduate women, by definition, were career salient. Surprisingly, though, 65% of the undergraduate women were aiming at advanced degrees. This is even more interesting considering their higher average age. These women still had to finish their bachelor's degree and were willing to go an extra 2-4 years on top of that. With a median age of 44 this would mean they would not be moving into the job market until they were 47, certainly not a very typical age to begin a career.

When asked the importance of remaining active in a career, the overwhelming response was that an active career was "very important" to the undergraduate students, even more than to the graduate women. When asked about the certainty of occuaptional choice, at least half of both groups felt they were "very certain" about their careers. The somewhat larger number of graduate women responding "very certain" could be due to being farther down the road in terms of a career and perhaps having a clearer picture of what their career would entail, while the undergraduate women could still be exploring different career options.

Eyde's modified Reasons for Working Scale was used to derive two scores. The first measured how important career achievement reasons for working were to each subject. Here again the groups were very similar and tended towards the high end of the scale. For the second score, the Reasons for Working had been ranked in importance relative to each other. Again, the career achievement rankings from the two groups were the same and grouped at the salient end of the scale.

Eyde's Desire to Work Scale was also used. It measures women's desire to work under various combinations of numbers and ages of children and adequacy of husband's salary. The graduate women were concentrated at the high career salient end of the scale while the undergraduates were more evenly distributed over the scale. This is not surprising considering the difference in age between the two groups. The graduate women would have entered school at a younger age demonstrating their desire to work

with young children at home. The undergraduates apparently did not feel this to be appropriate and stayed at home until their children were older.

In summary, then, these undergraduate women were very certain of what they were doing and of the level they eventually wished to reach. In comparison with a highly career salient group of graduate students, they too must be considered career salient. Apparently when an older woman returns to school, she has considered her choices carefully and has a definate plan of action, regardless of background, and whether or not she is working towards a bachelor's or a doctor's degree

Since the lack of female role models is frequently cited as a deterrent to women going into a career, who were the role models for this highly career salient group of women? Let's take a look at Table 3.

The frequency of professional family members was fairly high. Among married women 55% of the undergraduates and 100% of the graduates had professional spouses. Over half of each group had working mothers (60% of the undergraduates, 55% of the graduates) and of those mothers who worked, 50% of the undergraduates' and 55% of the graduate students' mothers were professionals. A lower number of professionals is seen in the fathers of the undergraduates compared to the graduate women. This is not surprising considering the lower income level of the undergraduates' parents. Closely related to professionalism is educational level of family members which showed no different pattern from professional level except that the parents of the undergraduates tended to have lower educational levels.

As for work as a source of role models, 85% of both groups had worked for more than one year out of the past ten. In the open ended questions on role models, occupational colleagues were typically cited as having played a major role in encouraging them to continue their schooling and to realize their potential. These occupational role models stand out as a major source of support for their returning

to school. Most of the women in both groups worked in 1 to 3 jobs in the past ten years. This suggests that a wide variety of models was not necessarily gained, but that through strong relationships in a few jobs, models were acquired for realizing one's full potential and for seeing college as the best way to do that.

In terms of social clubs and socializing it was expected that the undergraduates, if less career salient, would participate more. But over and over the question of socialization was met with laughter and an exclamation of, "I don't have time for that anymore." 65% of the undergraduate women and 70% of the graduate students did not belong to any social clubs. 85% of the undergraduates and 70% of the graduates entertained or went out with others once a week or less. The lack of socializing underscores the high career salience of both groups and the abandonment of role models who would have a negative affect on one's career aspirations.

No single reference group stood out as the greatest influence on career decisions. More undergraduate women chose family members than professors (30%-professors, 40%-family members), while graduate students showed a slight preference for professors over family members (45%-professors, 30%-family members). This difference is not surprising if one considers that the graduate women have completed more schooling than have the undergraduates and would have had more time to be influenced by professors. There is no clear preference for either sex as role models. Mothers were not cited very often as either a first or second greatest influence by undergraduates (15%) and not at all by any of the gradauate students.

When asked in what ways the greatest influence on their careers decisions had affected them, the overwhelming response was that the person had encouraged them and pushed them to their limit rather than allowing them to stay at a level below their ability. Even those women who did not feel that they had ever had any role models mentioned people who had strongly encouraged them to continue their education. From this it would seem that the technical aspect to role models is not as important as their support for ideas such as returning to school.

Among those women who recognized technical role models in their lives, the majority cited women. Often this career women was a family member or someone the student had known as a young girl. But again these people also strongly encouraged these women to get an education and fulfill their potential.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion there are a few main points which seemed most important to me. First, the finding that the undergraduates were as career salient as the graduate students. This was particularly interesting in light of the higher average age of the undergraduates. Also, while there was no indication that people of either sex were more influential on career decisions, when asked about role models both groups listed professional women and working women in their own family as strong positive role models.

Finally these women did not seem to be finding role models in a technical sense but rather role models who had functioned more as mentors who pushed them to realize their full potential. Over and over the women said there was no <u>one</u> person who had really shaped their career goals, but their career was something <u>they</u> had always wanted to do. This would indicate that these women have considered what they want to do carefully before they return to school and were merely waiting for an appropriate opportunity to fulfill these goals. The main thing they needed aside from the right circumstances was a mentor to give them support in doing what might not be "typical" among their peer group at the time.

Handout for Western Psychological Assiciations Meetings
San Francisco, April 1978

Role Models and Career Salience in Older Female College Students in Psychology

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Table 1

Background Variables for 20 Undergraduate (UG) and 20 Graduate (GR) Older Female College Students in Psychology at The University of Washington, Winter 1978

Marital Status	f UG	GR
Married	11	10
Divorced or separated	7	8
Single	1	1
Living with partner not married	0	1
Widowed	1	0

Age	f UG	GR
34	0	2
35-39	5	10
40-44	6	4
45-49	6	2
50 and over	3	2

Number of Children	f UG	GR
None	2	8
One	2	2
Two	6	6
Three	5	2
Four	2	2
Five	3	0

Number of Children At Home	f UG	GR
None	6	9
One	3	5
Two	9	6
Three	2	0

Present Family Income	f UG	GR
Less than $10,000	5	8
$10,000-$19,000	6	3
$20,000-$29,000	4	2
$30,000 or more	5	7

Parent's Highest Income	f UG	GR
Less than $10,000	3	2
$10,000-$19,000	11	5
$20,000-$29,000	3	4
$30,000 or more	3	9

Table 2

Career Salience Variables for Undergraduate (UG) and Graduate (GR) Older Female College Students in Psychology at The University of Washington, Winter 1978

Greatest Life Satisfaction	f UG	GR
Career/occupation	6	6
Family relationships	11	12
Leisure/recreation	1	1
Religious activities	1	0
Community affairs	0	0
National betterment	0	0
Running a home	0	0
Other (personal growth, school)	1	1

Number 2 Life Satisfaction	f UG	GR
Career/occupation	8	8
Family relationships	7	4
Leisure/recreation	3	6
Religious activities	0	0
Community affairs	0	0
National betterment	1	1
Running a home	1	0
Other (human intimacy)	0	1

Importance of Remaining Active in a Career	f UG	GR
Very important	16	11
Moderately important	3	6
Somewhat important	1	2
Somewhat unimportant	0	1

Certainty of Occupational Choice	f UG	GR
Very certain	10	13
Moderately certain	8	4
Somewhat certain	2	3

Educational Goals	f UG	GR
Bachelor's	7	0
Master's	10	0
Ph.D.	3	20

Eyde's Reasons for Working Scale[1]	f UG	GR
Less than 80	0	1
80-99	5	4
100-119	3	6
120-139	9	9
More than 139	3	0

Eyde's Reasons for Working Scale Rankings[2]	f UG	GR
Less than 70	1	2
70-79	2	3
80-89	8	7
90-99	4	6
100-109	5	2

Eyde's Desire to Work Scale[3]	f UG	GR
100-129	2	3
130-159	4	1
160-189	3	1
190-219	3	5
220-249	6	8
More than 249	2	2

1 Most salient score possible--160
2 Most salient score possible-- 61
3 Most salient score possible--290

Table 3

Role Modeling Variables of Undergraduate (UG) and Graduate (GR)
Older Female College Students in Psychology at
The University of Washington, Winter 1978

Frequency of Family Member Being Professional	UG	GR
Spouse/partner	6/11	10/10
Mother	6/12	6/11
Father	7	11

Educational Level of Family Members	spouse		mother		father	
	UG	G	UG	G	UG	G
Less than high school	0	0	5	1	3	3
High school	1	2	4	6	8	7
Some College	7	1	4	10	1	2
Bachelor's	2	4	5	2	4	4
Advanced degree	1	4	1	1	3	4

Number of Different types of Work in Past 10 Years	f UG	GR
None	3	0
1-3	15	15
4-6	2	5

Number of Years Worked of the Last 10	f UG	GR
Less than 1 year	3	3
1-3 years	4	1
4-6 years	4	6
7-9 years	4	2
10 years	5	8

How often Entertain of Go Out with Others?	f UG	GR
Less than once a month	7	4
At least twice a month	5	2
At least once a week	5	9
Two or three times a week	3	3
More than 3 times a week	0	2

Number of Social Clubs Belong to	f UG	GR
None	13	14
One	1	5
Two	5	0
Three	1	1

Influences on Career Decisions	Greatest Influence f		Second Influence f	
	UG	GR	UG	GR
Same sex professor	3	5	4	4
Other sex professor	3	4	4	4
Mother	2	0	1	0
Father	3	1	2	0
Spouse/partner	3	5	1	1
Same sex friend	0	1	1	1
Other sex friend	1	0	3	0
Same sex occupational colleague	1	1	0	3
Other sex occupational colleague	1	2	1	3
Children	2	1	1	1
None	1	0	2	3

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